

Language Tells North Carolina History

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Have you ever used a *juvember* for target practice, seen a *boomer* in a tree, or acted like a *dingbatter*? If you know what these words mean, you probably have traveled all over North Carolina and know a lot about the state. *Juvember* is used for the word slingshot in the southeastern region of the state, especially among the Lumbee tribe of American Indians; *boomer* refers to a red squirrel in the Appalachian Mountain region; and *dingbatter* refers to a tourist or outsider on some islands of the Outer Banks.

Why is it that some people from the Outer Banks pronounce the phrase *high tide* as *hoi toide*, but people in Central North Carolina say *hah tahd*? Why do people who live in the Smoky Mountains use *you'uns* to refer to more than one person, and people in other parts of the state say *y'all*? And why do people in the Mountains refer to crooked things as *sigogglin* (pronounced *sígh-gog-lin*), when people on the coast call them *cattywampus*?

Language and dialect can tell us a lot about where people came from and how they settled into a region. A dialect is a variety of a language spoken by people from a particular region or social group. Since everyone comes from someplace and belongs to a social group, everyone speaks a dialect.

Naturally, some dialects are much more noticeable than others. People take their language with them when they travel, and settlers often preserve traits of their original language long after they have inhabited a new region. From Murphy to Manteo, the effect of earlier settlement history can be heard in the dialects of North Carolina. In the state, in fact, the phrase “from Murphy to Manteo” is often used to refer to any long distance between two places, not just travel between the two cities.

Many place-names in North Carolina reveal the state's American Indian heritage. Hatteras, Ocracoke, Wanchese, and Manteo on the Outer Banks remind us that Native peoples once fished from these sandy barrier islands on the coast. In the western part of the state, place-names like Cullowhee, Cherokee, and Watauga tell us that American Indians hunted and grew crops in the mountains of Appalachia. Spanish, German, and Gaelic culture also affected the early language in North Carolina, but no language influenced the Old North State like the different dialects brought to the region by the early English-speaking inhabitants.

Regional dialects of North Carolina developed from the early settlement and movement of English speakers into the territory. The earliest area of European settlement was the coastal region that includes the Outer Banks. Most of these English speakers came by water, at first from England and then from the coast of modern-day Virginia. Outer Banks pronunciations such as *hoi toide* for *high tide* and the pronunciation of

brown like *brain* are distinct within North Carolina but shared with coastal and island areas in Virginia and Maryland. They are also still found in some parts of southern England. Today, the Outer Banks dialect is rapidly fading and becoming more rare.

In the part of North Carolina near the Virginia border, settlers from Tidewater Virginia came overland and brought with them the pronunciation of *out* and *about* like *oat* and *aboat*. These groups of early settlers from Tidewater Virginia stayed mostly in the northern part of the state.

The Coastal Plain region was settled mostly by people who came from inland regions of Virginia, where plantations existed. They often brought with them enslaved people who worked in the tobacco and cotton fields. The mix of African American and European American speech resulted in a regional dialect that is typical of other parts of the South where a heavy concentration of slaves existed. White and black people in this region did not pronounce their *r* sounds after vowels, so that corn was pronounced as *co'n*, and *far* was pronounced as *fah*. This was quite different from the Outer Banks to the east and Mountain speech to the west, where the *r* was pronounced in corn and far. The Coastal Plain also shows how the presence of African Americans strongly influenced the historical development of language in the South.

To the North Carolina west, the Scots-Irish came down the Great Wagon Road. This group landed originally in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and then moved west and south along the Appalachian Mountains into North Carolina. Many of the dialect traits found in the Mountains of North Carolina still bear the imprint of the original Scots-Irish influence. These include the use of *you'uns* in *What are you'uns doing today?*; the use of *anymore* in sentences such as *Anymore we watch a lot of DVDs*; and the use of *vittles* for *food* in *We had some good vittles today*.

The Piedmont dialect developed as people from the north, west, and east spread into the central portion of the state and mixed their original dialects. This area shares common southern dialect characteristics: the use of *y'all* in *What are y'all doing today?*; *fixin'* to in *I'm fixin' to go in a minute*; and *cut off* or *on* in *Please cut off the lights*. This is probably the most frequently used dialect in North Carolina.

Regional settlement is only part of the explanation for North Carolina dialects. Cultural groups also have played an important role in the development of dialects. One of the most distinctive dialects in North Carolina is found among the Lumbee Indians of Robeson County. Words like *juvember*, *on the swamp*, for neighborhood, and *Lum*, for a Lumbee who is active in Lumbee culture, help set apart their dialect. During the last century, some African Americans have also been developing a more distinct dialect that marks black youth culture in the cities. In addition to dialect words, the use of *be* in *They be acting silly* or the absence of the *is* form of *be* in *She nice* are cultural markers of this dialect today. The immigration of many Hispanics into North Carolina over the last decade is making the state much more bilingual than it has been in the recent past. The Spanish language may also influence English and eventually result in a new cultural dialect called Hispanic English.

Language never stands still. It is always changing. Dialect reveals our regional and cultural past at the same time that it shows how we continue to develop and adapt in the present.

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